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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER MOPS KDEM KPAO IR IZ

SUBJECT: PRT MAYSAN: ALI AL-SHARQI OPERATION SPURS PUBLIC
AND POLITICAL BACKLASH AND ELECTION RHETORIC

REF: A. BAGHDAD 405
¶B. BAGHDAD 422

Classified By: PRT MAYSAN Team Leader Stephen Banks for reasons 1.4(b)
& (d)

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Maysan cable.

¶2. (S) SUMMARY: Inaccurate reports of a unilateral USF-I raid upon a village in southern Maysan provinces, leaving a woman and child among the ten dead, sparked angry reactions among local residents. In reality, the combined Iraqi-US operation was aimed at disrupting the Iranian-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) network, which USF intelligence links to indirect fire (IDF) and IRAM smuggling and attacks in southern Iraq. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and USF coordinated the operation with GOI authorities to ensure that it was in compliance with the Security Agreement. Provincial leaders led the way on February 12, with angry allegations of illegal massacre in Maysan's Ali al-Sharqi district. The PRT felt an immediate impact, as many contacts cancelled meetings and ducked calls. The public mood calmed when the operation was clarified, but the event remains an election season football for the political classes. While provincial officials now blame Baghdad and have mostly stopped blaming U.S. forces, rival political parties accuse provincial leaders of weakness in allowing the ISF and USF to conduct such an operation. END SUMMARY

INFORMATION VACUUM ENFLAMES LOCAL OPINION

¶3. (S) Reftel A recounted the facts of "Operation Steel Curtain" on February 11-12, a combined U.S./Iraqi special operations forces (CJSOTF) operation to serve Iraqi federal arrest warrants on Kata'ib Hezbollah suspects in the village of Al Duwayjat, in Ali al-Sharqi. (Note: Spellings of the village and district vary. End note.) The operation occurred early morning February 12. U.S. Forces, the Embassy, and PRT Maysan agreed not to comment on the operation to local journalists, but to refer press inquiries to the Provincial Chief of Police SMG Sa'ad al-Harbiyah. The PRT shared preliminary information from our military partners privately with provincial officials. As public ire mounted over the mostly exaggerated accounts of the operation, provincial politicians were frustrated at their inability to get corroborating information from Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) sources, whether provincial or Baghdad, until late afternoon on February 12. Provincial authorities announced that Governor Mohamed Shi'a al-Sudani (State of Law), PC chairman Abdu al-Hussein Abdu al-Reza al-Saedi (ISCI), and key PC members would form an ad hoc committee to investigate the incident. The committee would collect testimony and evidence from the community and ISF officials and assess responsibility for what they considered indiscriminate and excessive use of deadly force. The provincial government formed their ad hoc committee independently of the Prime Minister-ordered Ministry of Defense inquiry.

¶4. (C) According to media reports and their own accounts, provincial civilian and ISF leaders turned out in significant numbers to the tiny town of Al Duwayjat (between 200 and 300 residents) by late morning to participate in the funeral ceremony for the victims, which turned into a "martyrs' march" protest. The Governor proclaimed three days of public mourning. By the same accounts, the first day's march drew between 500 and 1000 participants. Officials competed to outdo each other in outrage over what they characterized as an unjustified and illegal massacre of innocent civilians, including women and children, in a unilateral attack by U.S. forces. Local leaders and Sadrists activists in the district fed the narrative describing a lurid and inflammatory version of events to journalists. Protestors waved a bloody shirt--purported to be that of a dead two-year-old--for the television cameras. Senior Iraqi Army General Abud from the Ministry of Defense arrived in Amarah late on February 12 and briefed Governor Sudani and other senior Maysani officials on the operation confirming that it had been a GOI-approved combined ISF/U.S. operation.

OPERATION FOLLOWS DE-BA'ATHIFICATION CONTROVERSY

¶5. (C) The emotional aftermath was the second blow in rapid succession to the USG's public image in Maysan. The de-Ba'athification controversy (reftel B) brought between 3,000 and 5,000 demonstrators to the streets of downtown Amarah on February 9, where many criticized perceived U.S. interference in the de-Ba'athification process. For a time, the February 12 episode transformed latent skepticism into active anger and hostility; Maysanis believed U.S. forces violated the Security Agreement and were responsible for the

deadly raid.

POPULAR MOOD FURIOUS--THEN EASES

¶6. (C) PRT LES monitored media coverage and listened to street opinion around the provincial capital, Al Amarah. Throughout February 12-13, Iraqi media maintained near continuous coverage of the "massacre" with extensive reporting on continuing funeral ceremonies and "martyrs' marches." Governor Sudani called the episode a "massacre" of "innocent civilians." Sadrists Trend PC member Maytham Lafta claimed that the dead were innocent victims, and blamed the raid on U.S. troops. Amarah mayor Rafie Abdul-Jabbar Noshi (Sadrists Trend) was also widely reported as having called the attack a "U.S. raid." Typical television ticker ribbons and man on the street interviews proclaimed "US massacre," "US raid," "anger in the streets," "citizens outraged," and "calls for justice." Military sources in the province echoed these public opinion findings.

¶7. (C) By February 14, the public outrage had eased somewhat and opinion fractured into various threads. Media coverage turned to electioneering including the new issue of whether the February 12 incident showed weakness or incompetence on the part of provincial leaders. Both the PRT's and local U.S. military sources reported that the public was now aware that the event was not a unilateral U.S. attack, but had been a combined Iraqi/U.S. operation with approval from top ISF officials in Baghdad. Many redirected their anger to the ISF. Some comments heard in the street suggested it was "typical for the ISF to screw up and then try to blame it on someone else." Moreover, a second wave of grapevine news from Ali al-Sharqi conveyed the validation that the targeted house was indeed known to many local residents as a Khataib-Hezbollah residence. A certain segment of Maysani opinion turned its anger at Iran and its Maysani clients for precipitating the deadly incident. Man on the street media interviews aired February 15 did not mention the U.S., but seemed to focus more generally on the tragic death of innocents and the view that a stronger government would not have allowed such a thing to happen.

¶7. (S) The PRT immediately felt aftershocks from this event. Most directly, Camp Garry Owen, where the PRT is based, was shelled with seven 107mm rockets just before 7:00am on February 13, fortunately without serious harm to anyone. (COMMENT: Local U.S. military analysts judge that this attack had been planned and prepared before the February 12 episode, and had only awaited a suitable moment to execute. The public mood on February 12 was a perfect opportunity. END COMMENT) In previous attacks, the PRT and our U.S. military hosts had received expressions of regret and sympathy from public and private officials alike. In this instance, however, no such sentiments were forthcoming, and PRT LESSs reported most Maysanis felt the PRT deserved it. The PRT also found a number of planned meetings were cancelled and many regular contacts even dodged telephone calls for the first 48-72 hours.

¶8. (C) On February 14, PRToffs met Deputy Governor Khalid Qubian (National Reform Trend/INA), the Governor's PRT liaison Engineer Sabah Zedan, the Governor's spokesman Mohaneed al-Hashemi, and PC Chairman's PRT liaison Ahmed Saleh, to discuss how to repair the damage. Qubian agreed to correct the record in his February 15 local television debate, and he did so. (Note: The panel debate featured representatives of the major Maysani political parties/blocs, Qrepresentatives of the major Maysani political parties/blocs, and mostly centered on the question of provincial officials' alleged "weakness" in letting this happen. End note.) Zedan agreed to convey our concerns and request to the Governor, but confided that the Governor feels pressured by the Sadr Trend and can ill-afford to antagonize their strong constituency. Speaking the same day as Qubian, well after the facts of the incident had been briefed to provincial officials and after public opinion had moderated, Hashemi was the most direct in the view that the USG had "brought it on themselves" with the Ali al-Sharqi raid, saying the people and the government were angry. He commented that the public is a "ticking time bomb."

HOW MANY ACTUALLY DIED?

¶9. (C) Media reporting of the casualties has been inconsistent. The PRT's local U.S. military partners report that they have no independent verification of provincial ISF reports of 10 killed. U.S. forces have a high degree of confidence that at least five died, probably including at

least one woman and one teenager. The PRT has no corroboration for the accusation that a baby or toddler was killed. The later death of persons wounded in the firefight may explain some of the discrepancies.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Provincial officials were genuinely angered to be blindsided by the operation. That anger and frustration was compounded by their inability to get any timely information from ISF sources. U.S. military and diplomatic officials, waiting for the ISF lead as agreed, did not speak on the record about what had happened--despite the Governor's February 12 request that we do so to clarify the situation. Provincial ISF commanders were almost as much in the dark as the civilian provincial leadership and were wary of wading into the fray. A chorus of anti-U.S. political voices was only too happy to fill this information vacuum with inflammatory misinformation. The ISF needs to have public affairs/information operations contingency plans ready to go in advance of an operation where the possibility of unexpected casualties exists. ISF must learn the critical importance of timely communication with civil officials and the public.

¶11. (C) Lacking independent information, provincial

officials quickly joined the bandwagon of public U.S. condemnation. The anti-Sadrist coalition that won control of the provincial government last year remains uneasy about the durability of its success, and--especially in this election season--still worries over being tagged as "collaborators with the occupiers." Populist causes like the chimerical "Ba'athism" debate and rallying to "martyrs" are both threat and opportunity to Maysan's provincial leaders. The good news is how quickly Maysani public opinion re-oriented as facts emerged, and that the issue ended up leading into a reasonably legitimate political debate about Iraqi federalism and the rule of law. The provincial fact-finding inquiry may also turn out to be a canny way for provincial leaders to "do something" to satisfy public anger, while avoiding committing rashly to one course of action.

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